

TOBACCO CONTROL

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Editorials

The tobacco industry strategy: new subject, same tactics

When the US Environmental Protection Agency (EPA) released its draft risk assessment on the link between lung cancer and environmental tobacco smoke (ETS), the scientific and health communities applauded the report because its conclusions were fully supported by the evidence that secondhand smoke causes lung cancer and other respiratory ailments in non-smokers.

The only major dissent came from the tobacco industry. The article by Bero and Glantz in this issue¹ indicates that most of the comments received by the EPA in response to the draft risk assessment were submitted by individuals affiliated with the tobacco industry. Furthermore, Bero and Glantz found that those respondents, in their attempt to discredit the report, cited fewer studies regarding ETS and more studies that had not been peer reviewed.

These findings are no surprise to people who are familiar with the tobacco industry's methods. Whenever the safety of its products has been questioned, the tobacco industry has flooded the information channels with its own claims, has tried to plant doubts about the established science, and has tried to shift the focus away from the clear scientific and health issues involved.

While I was fighting to ban smoking on airlines in the late 1980s, one of the tobacco industry's favourite tactics was to try to divert attention to other air quality issues. By trying to show that there were other problems with the quality of the air on aeroplanes, they hoped to stall action on secondhand smoke. They argued, falsely, that a smoking ban would be ineffective in improving air quality unless the hazards associated with other air pollutants were addressed first.

When they could not successfully divert attention from the fundamental health issue, they questioned the growing body of scientific evidence about the link between ETS and lung cancer. When that didn't work, they tried to argue that society would not tolerate such a change, and that a smoking ban would lead to fist fights in the aisles of aeroplanes.

They also attempted to demonstrate the strength of smokers' convictions by funding a supposedly independent "grassroots" smokers' rights "movement". They organised local meetings for smokers on the companies' mailing lists, at which speakers preached that smokers were becoming a persecuted minority that needed to rise up to protect their "rights".

They were wrong on all counts. Fortunately, the US Congress saw through their smoke screen and, in 1989, banned smoking on virtually all domestic airline flights. In doing so, we removed the hazard that could most easily be eliminated from airline cabin environments with the most immediate benefit to air quality.

Since the tobacco industry cannot directly refute the unequivocal findings that smoking causes cancer and ETS causes cancer in non-smokers, the industry has repeatedly tried to sow just enough doubt about these findings to slow the passage of other health-related tobacco legislation.

On a number of occasions, I have debated smoking issues with representatives of the tobacco industry. While they will not admit that smoking causes cancer, many are also unwilling to claim it *does not* cause cancer. I believe they know the truth about their products, but their liability and profit concerns keep them from admitting it. Instead, they hope to cause just enough public confusion to prevent effective federal regulation of their products.

An article in the 11 February 1993 edition of the *Wall Street Journal*² described what it called "the longest-running misinformation campaign in US business history". In 1954, the tobacco industry announced the creation of a new research group, subsequently known as the Council for Tobacco Research, which would be funded by the industry but which would remain independent. The article goes on to describe how, for nearly 40 years, the council "has been the hub of a massive effort to cast doubt on the links between smoking and disease...[T]he ostensibly independent council has spent millions of dollars advancing sympathetic science. At the same time, it has sometimes disregarded, or even cut off, studies of its own that implicated smoking as a health hazard."

As early as 1958, the *Wall Street Journal* article reports, the council began to find links between cigarettes and cancer. Yet the industry continued to discount concerns about the safety of its products. Researchers who disagreed with the industry allege that their funding was cut off while researchers who continued to question the link to cancer and other diseases received generous funding. The most sensitive studies were secretly moved into a "Special Projects" unit where they could be directly controlled and the results withheld if unfavourable. At the same time, the industry publicised other council studies whose findings they preferred.

The special projects research became a particular issue in the case of *Haines v. Liggett Group*, in which plaintiffs alleged that the tobacco industry perpetrated a public relations fraud by seeking to discredit or neutralise the findings about the risks of smoking through the work of the council.

In his 1992 opinion in the district court, Judge H. Lee Sarokin stated: "The evidence presented by plaintiff supports a finding that the industry research which might indict smoking as a cause of illness was diverted to secret research projects and that the publicised efforts were

primarily directed at finding causes other than smoking for the illnesses being attributed to it."

He added:

"While the efforts which the CTR chose to advertise were well publicized, plaintiffs learned of a secret division of the CTR, the "special projects" division. Under the auspices of the special projects program, defendants' counsel and other tobacco industry attorneys collaborated in assessing, monitoring, and directing the scope of research projects purportedly designed to identify expert witnesses and to develop evidence supporting defendants' positions in existing and anticipated litigation and Congressional hearings."

If the industry's documents from its special projects research ever come to light, we may learn more fully how the industry used its supposedly independent counsel to try to affect the outcome of court cases and Congressional deliberations regarding the health effects of tobacco. If Judge Sarokin's judicial opinion is any indication, the documents must be devastating to the credibility of the tobacco industry. Having reviewed some of them *in camera*, the judge included this stinging indictment in his judicial opinion: "[T]he tobacco industry may be the king of concealment and disinformation."

The tobacco industry's strategy with regard to ETS appears similar. The industry's spokespersons try to plant just enough doubt in the minds of the American public to deter smoking restrictions. They question the conclusions reached by eminently qualified independent scientists.

They suggest that there isn't enough scientific evidence to be sure that ETS causes cancer. They point to non-peer-reviewed studies to back their assertions.

And in this year's hearings on whether the federal workplace should be made smokefree, they have returned to a favourite diversionary tactic from the airline smoking ban debate. They have argued again that other air quality issues should be addressed instead of tobacco smoke.

The Bero and Glantz study makes it clear that most of the effort to undercut the EPA report and perpetuate doubts about ETS is coming from people affiliated with the industry that has the most to lose. I hope the American public will recognise the pattern and put as much faith in the tobacco industry's claims about ETS as it has put in the industry's claims about tobacco use.

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1 Bero LA, Glantz SA. Tobacco industry response to a risk assessment of environmental tobacco smoke. *Tobacco Control* 1993; 2: 103-13.

2 Freedman AM, Cohen LP. How cigarette makers keep health question 'open' year after year. *Wall Street Journal* 1993; February 11; pp A1, A10.